Fleet Forces Command Clips

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Restrict Sonar Use Until Effects Better Understood

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Whether the Navy ought to install a sonar training range off the North Carolina coast isn't a case of the whales vs. the warriors _ or it shouldn't be. This nation's security depends on healthy oceans teeming with sea life as surely as it does on an ability to detect unfriendly submarines. We need both.

Yet, science has tied sonar's sound pulses to three cases of fatal whale beachings. In one, autopsies showed internal injuries that could have been caused by gas bubbles if the mammals had been startled into surfacing too quickly. In another case, the Navy conceded that sonar was the culprit, while blaming an unusually limited escape route. North Carolina also has raised the possibility that sonar could be damaging to fish.

The science of sonar remains a work in progress, but the direction in which it's heading argues for extreme caution. The Navy ought to limit the areas in which sonar is used for training until it's clear that damage to sea life can be avoided. If that means delaying an East Coast training range, so be it.

In its environmental impact statement, the Navy says it needs the 660-square-mile area to replicate the shallow waters of the Arabian Sea and elsewhere for teaching sailors and pilots how to hunt quiet, diesel-powered submarines. Because hostile nations, including Iran and North Korea, have these submarines, it's clearly within the Navy's mission to be able to detect them.

West Coast training grounds are said to be too far away to be practical for the Atlantic Fleet to use. So the Navy looked at three workable areas off the coast of Florida, Virginia and North Carolina. The North Carolina location was chosen for its proximity to the Camp Lejeune Marine Base.

Drawing on its West Coast experience with sonar, the Navy insists the risks to sea life are negligible. That may be so, but to make a wise call, there must be a broader balancing of the need to detect submarines against the danger of degrading the ocean environment.

A federal court, which weighed the risks of the most powerful sonar, pointed the way with a 2003 decision limiting low-frequency sonar to a portion of the Pacific. It would make sense also to limit the use of mid-frequency sonar, which the Navy would deploy off North Carolina, to a single area where whales and fish could be closely monitored.

That's the kind of study needed to solidly link sonar to whale beachings, rule out such a link, or reveal ways sonar can be used safely. The evidence of harm already on the record is too strong to be ignored.

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